The creation of identities, the formation of social relationships and the development of valuable skills in First Person Shooter games

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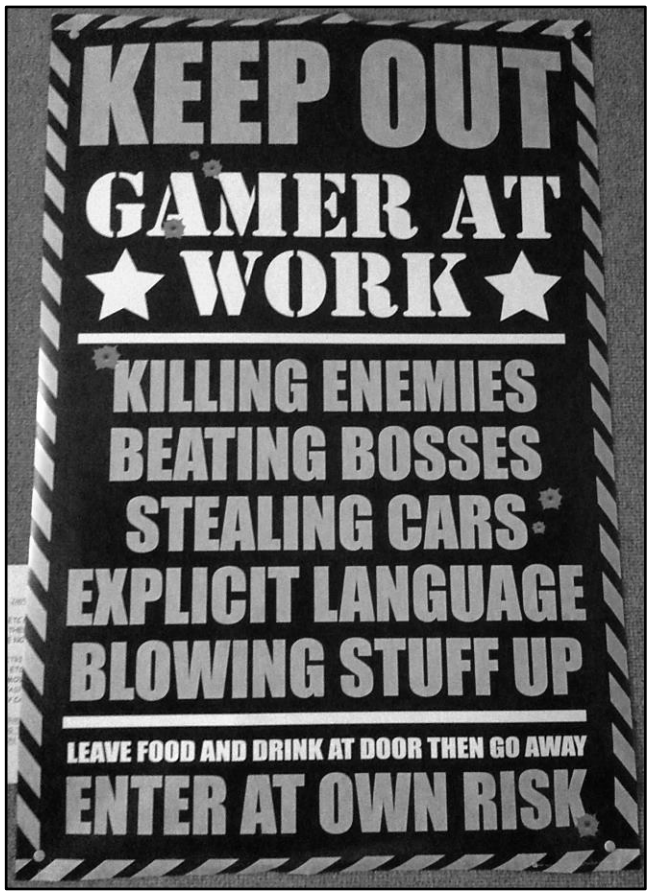

Figure 1- A poster which hangs in the room of one of the gamers. Is this the image they want to have or is it the image that has been given to them?

"I saved your fucking life"

Loners. Loafers. Freaks. All those notions crossed my mind when I first passed the X-box room in one of the halls of residence of the University of St Andrews, Scotland. I am a girl and over the last 21 years of my life I had never played an X-box game, not to mention a First-Person Shooter game (FPS). But that is about to change. Before starting the journey into the world of FPS gaming, I would like to take the opportunity to explain what a FPS actually is, regardless of common prejudices. A FPS is a videogame in which a gamer visually embraces the perspective of a virtual character and tries to complete a mission which involves killing as many enemies as possible. My research starts rather unpromisingly as I

stand still in front of the TV-room, clueless, uneasy and anxious. I am about to enter a world I never wanted to be part of, a world that I knew only from negative headlines. I can hear the gamers shout and laugh, the raging of the weapons *bam- bam- BAM!* and the death rattle of virtual beings. *It is the middle of the day, it is sunny! What am I doing here and- more importantly- What are they doing here?*

The first thing I notice is that the room itself is surprisingly bright with four large windows that let the sunshine in. *Huh? Do gamers not play FPS in dark rooms, in rooms where the air is stifling?* The room is located on the ground floor, right next to the entrance, which explains why so many people walk by. The majority of those walking by are drawn to what happens in this small room, almost as if by magic. Some only glance at the 30-inch screen, others enter the room, quietly and unnoticed, to watch the gamers play. Just a few of them stay more than 5 minutes. The gamers I mostly worked with, four male students in their early twenties, do not seem to be irritated by this constant flux of spectators. This can not only be explained by the fact that they all sit with their backs turned towards the door, but also because the game requires their full attention (compare with figure 2). The gamers are separated from their audience and, in more general terms, from the rest of the world, by a wall of large chairs, namely the chairs they sit on (compare with figure 2).

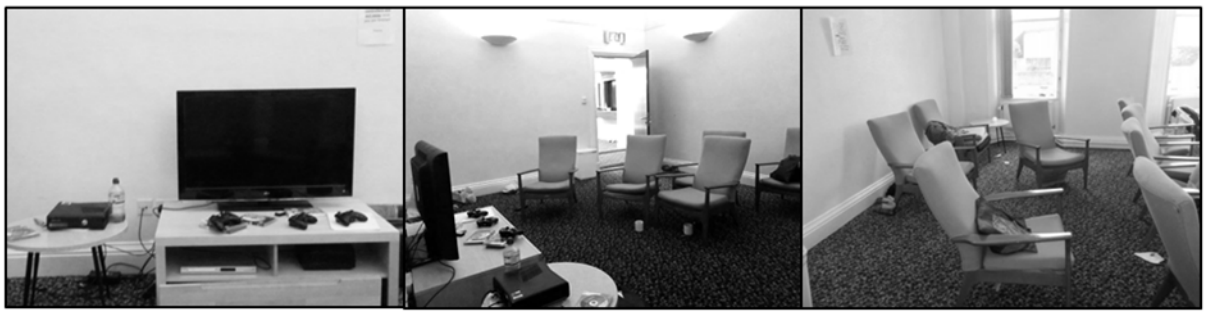

Figure 2- The TV-room in which the X-Box stands. Three different perspective: What the gamers see (Left); What I saw (Centre); What students that walk by see (Right).

To me it almost seems like this physical barrier divides their world into two: gaming and everything else. This impression is amplified by the fact that those who stand behind the chairs, the gamers' audience, only rarely dare to address a word directly to those who are playing. Inevitably, the same applies to me and, at first, it condemns me to only observe. If I ask one of the gamers a question while they are playing, I only get answers such as "What did you say, Judith? (I repeat my question) Well you see… E.! What are you doing? How did

you just kill me?". I soon give up and turn towards formal interviews. In this particular social setting, these unspoken rules create a unique environment that swings between notions of private space, on the side of the gamers, and public space, on the side of the audience. The social interactions in the X-box room generate an environment where the boundaries of notions of individual and society, as well as of areas of visibility and of concealment, merge (Susen 2011). Although private as well as public spaces might appear to be "relatively autonomous", they are fluid concepts which are "mutually dependent" and which are constantly interacting (Susen 2011: 39). This impression becomes particularly noticeable when comparing the bodily postures of the audience and of the gamers. *What are they doing?* One of the gamers, E., sees my confusion and explains to me: "Judith, now we get to lean!". During the countdown that announces the start of the game, the gamers lean forward and move closer to the screen, their necks stiffen and their entire bodies are now focused on the screen. Although the spectators do not actively participate, they show physical reactions similar to the gamers' since they fall silent and move closer to the gamers.

The very first game of every gaming session starts with choosing X-box characters through which the gamers will experience the virtual world. Wright et al's work on online gaming states that names given to those virtual figures are of particular interest as they are the "symbolic markers" of the actual human beings behind the characters (2002: 5). Through names, the gamers define their place in the virtual world (Wright et al 2002). It has to be kept in mind though that the two settings, namely playing FPS online or in an actual room, cannot be compared straightforwardly, given that in the latter scenario gamers can see and communicate directly with each other. Moreover, the four FPS gamers I met have to share the X-box with all the students who live in their hall of residence. Consequently, they can only choose between virtual figures that have previously been created by other gamers. To put it another way, they did not have a direct influence on their X-box characters' names. Nonetheless I soon realise that the names of the virtual warriors are of remarkable importance during a game, and yet it would be wrong to assume that they serve as a means of defining the gamers' characters. Take for example some of the most striking names given to the X- box characters: 'My dick', 'My boner' and 'Snuggles'. It is worth mentioning that the latter was invented by a female gamer, while the two former were created by male gamers. If anything, the names provide a constant source of amusement

since the gamers call each other by their virtual, not their real names during a game. This gives rise to sentences such as “I go left with My dick!” or “Snuggles killed My dick!”, which are usually followed by roars of laughter. *Oh guys, are you being serious? How childish!* What might appear to an outsider as immature behaviour is an integral part of the gamers’ interaction during a game. Put simply, tension is released through often highly sexual comments or jokes (Wright et al 2002). Take for example E. who comments on his performance: “Fast moves … so that I can reach the climax faster.” The entire group bursts out laughing. J. tells me that one characteristic of good gamers is that they are not only able to concentrate on the game but that they are also able to actively create a relaxed, sociable ambiance. This can be extended to the ways in which FPS gamers communicate with each other. As far as I am concerned, common exclamations such as “Fuck!”, “Shit!”, “Fuck my life!”, “I shot you in the shit!”, “Fuck you, you fucking jumping bastard!” and “Piss off, you cunt!” are not at all manifestations of an aggressive atmosphere or of a poor up-brining. Rather, gamers take advantage of the unique opportunity to experience and express emotions that might be controversial or inappropriate in other contexts and under different social norms. The gamers quite openly experiment with an idealized “hypermasculine” identity (Jansz 2005: 231). Abstract concepts such as pride, honour and success can be virtually experienced, tested and contested. This, however, does not mean that the experience itself is virtual. Quite the contrary seems to be true. To illustrate this, one only needs to refer to the following examples: As E. was particularly successful in one game, which means that he managed to kill numerous enemies without his virtual character being killed himself, the rest of the group said “Oh, watch out everyone, E. has the man-mode activated!”. Likewise, when E.’s virtual character behave in a way that his co-player C. did not consider to be appropriate, C. expressed his discontent by saying ”E., you have no honour!”. Klimmt et all is certainly correct in saying that playing FPS allows young male gamers to try out all their “possible selves”, all the ideals that they “might become”, “like to become” or are “afraid of becoming” (2009: 364). Emotions are a central part in this process as they “are the one of the most fundamental aspects” of someone’s identity (Jansz 2005: 231). This applies in particular to emotions, such as fear, that do not conform to idealized masculine role models. Jansz argues that video games have to be understood as “laboratories of emotions” (2005: 231).

Gaming is not only a means of challenging a given social order but it also is a means of creating and strengthening male identities and relationships. When I ask one of the gamers, M., if he thinks that playing FPS games helps to find one's place in a group, he agrees. He also points out that FPS are especially helpful in the first week of every gamer's first year at university. Even though gamers do not know each other, they still have something in common, something to talk about and something to do*. That is so strange! How can shooting virtual soldiers be understood a social, friendly getting together?* Gamers, M. rectifies, do not think that killing virtual people is psychologically associated to killing virtual beings because they know that the "enemies are just random pixel". *But it looks so real! The kill, the blood, the screams!* Hartman and Vorderer argue that the great majority of gamers can only enjoy FPS if the violence itself does not offend their inner moral standards (2010). The key concept that needs to be introduced at this point is "moral disengagement" (Hartman and Vorderer 2010: 95). Often, the features of a FPS ensure the gamers are able to enjoy every single kill without feeling guilty. Firstly, gamers perceive virtual characters only as "quasi-social" beings to which traditional social and moral norms do not apply (Hartman and Vorderer 2010: 95-97). As a consequence, experienced gamers do not anthropomorphize their virtual enemies, that means that they do not attribute "social meaning to stimuli that are not social" (Hartman and Vorderer 2010: 95). Secondly, gamers are always given a good reason to fight, to some extent one might even say they act morally by shooting virtual enemies. In Call of Duty Black Ops 2™, for instance, the gamers have to save the world from being annihilated. Thirdly, gamers always have the option to actively remember the fact that they

Figure 3- The FPS perspective. The gamers perceive the world through the eyes of their virtual characters

are ‘only playing a game’ and that it is ‘not real’. And indeed, the four gamers I talk to unanimously claim that they are “not stupid enough to think that it’s real”.

Given what has just been said, I am even more surprised to see that the gamers nonetheless show a strong physical and emotional reaction to what happens on the screen. This becomes particularly evident when somebody’s virtual character gets hurt or killed. The gamer then often shouts “Aua!” out loud, or says things such as “That was so frightening, guys!”. *That does not make any sense!* It has to be understood that even though gamers perceive the virtual world through the eyes of their characters, it would not be accurate to assume that they fully identify themselves with their virtual equivalents (compare with figure 3). Therefore, it is of particular importance to distinguish “projecting one’s own identity onto something or someone else” and “internalizing a point of view” (Klimmt et al 2009: 356). Similar to actors, gamers play a role by tightly embracing their character’s worldview and yet they do not become the character.

Most people acknowledge that video games are interactive and multimodal, involving audio, visual and tactile stimuli. But, as a matter of fact they are much more than that. Unlike other forms of media entertainment, video games, and particularly FPS, require an effort on the part of the gamer. To become good, gamers need to invest time so that eventually they are able to draw upon “tactic knowledge” (Jansz 2005: 222). Tactic knowledge involves knowing the different subplots, having memorized the various sceneries and having developed an excellent hand-eye coordination (Jansz 2005).

The game is so fast! How can they possibly understand what is happening? The screen is divided into four sub-screens, one for each player. I notice that the four gamers are not only able to grasp what happens on their own, but also what happens on everybody else’s screens. Consequently, they are able to warn each other: “Attention, M.! An enemy right behind you!”. *How extraordinary!* By observing closely it becomes evident that the gamers do not need to look at their controllers while they are playing as they subconsciously know which buttons to press. Once a game begins, the relationship between the controller and the gamer seems to change. The controller ceases to be perceived as an external, material device and becomes an integral part of the player. Some gamers even have their own controllers that they always bring with them when they want to play a FPS. When J. complains that he is “not used to the controller”, E. replies: “Oh I know what you are talking

about, that is the worst!". *But the controllers all look the same!* To have to play with a controller that is not their own, means that the gamers initially reduce their efficiency because they first need to get used to the new device. This is not only true for the real controller but also for the virtual weapon the controller stands for. As a result, the process of choosing weapons before the game starts can take up a long time, sometimes even longer than the actual game, which is limited to 10 minutes. *So many different options to choose from and all the weapons look the same to me! How can they possibly decide?* Hence, another important characteristic of good gamers is a deep understanding of the guns that the game provides them with. This knowledge cannot be acquired by anything but a lot of experience.

Similarly, when playing a multi-player FPS, the gamers' success highly depends on how well they know the people they play with. If the gamers play against each other, they constantly try to outwit their opponents in order to gain the upper hand. One sentence I hear repeatedly while watching the group play is: "You didn't think I would do that, did you?" However, if they play in one team, it is remarkable how much mental support they provide for each other. C. repeatedly assures his ally M. of his help: "I am with you!", "I am coming to help you!". The gamers know their own performance depends on the overall performance of their team and vice versa. It is thus not surprising that C. turns around to his co-player M., whose performance is not fully satisfying, and says: "M., are you now going to be useful or not?" Gaming is skill. And concentration. While my own attentiveness diminishes at a worryingly fast rate after only a few hours of observing the gamers, they still seem to be able to fully focus on the game. However, it is only when I first play a FPS myself, that I fully understand how challenging it actually is. After a short introduction to all the different buttons, the game starts. I feel like I have been plunged in at the deep end. And it most certainly did not help that M., who watches my performance, says: "Oh, she has no idea what is going on!". My heartbeat accelerates, I start to sweat and I stop noticing what is going on around me. *Just the game and me*. Although the game is set on the easiest mode, I constantly get killed. It makes me realise how bad my hand-eye coordination is and how little I am able to multitask. And yet, to my biggest surprise, I get ambitions. While I cannot deny the fact that I initially felt uncomfortable shooting virtual characters, I still want to be good at it. And indeed, with every game I play, I get better. After a few days and many,

many games, I burst with pride when I hear M. say to someone else that “Yeah, Judith’s getting better, I taught her well”.

This essay does not want to trivialise the power violent video games can have on people as it is undeniable that FPS stimulate the exact same regions of the brain as real life aggression (Hartman and Vorderer 2010). FPS gamers are most certainly aware of the negative image their hobby has. For me this became clear when E. turned around, his eyes examining me, and said: “You want to know what I think you will write down? Here you go, Judith: Strange, alien behaviour observed!”. However, from my own experience, I consider FPS as a means of creating one’s identify, strengthening friendships, developing valuable soft skills and finding one’s place in a world where virtual and real spaces fuse more and more.

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